

Jack Valenti Post 11/22/88 - cpud

The Light in the White House Never Went Out

The motorcade moved through the streets under spangled sunshine in a clear blue featureless sky. There was nary a hostile expression on the faces of the hundreds of thousands of jubilant onlookers who squealed with delight and gave their affectionate applause. It was just past noon on Thursday, Nov. 22, 1963, the visit of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson to Dallas, a day that all America remembers, and no American forgets.

I rode in that motorcade, some seven cars back of President and Mrs. Kennedy, Gov. John Connally and his wife, Nellie. I shared a vehicle with Liz Carpenter, chief of staff to Mrs. Lyndon Johnson; Evelyn Lincoln, secretary to the president; and Pamela Tunure, aide to the First Lady. I was the only one without official status. My advertising and political consulting agency, Weekley & Valenti, was in charge of the Austin political fund-raising dinner, scheduled to begin in 6½ hours in the capital city of Texas.

It was one of those political events where everything seemed to go right, where all the meticulous advance work had been pleasurably redeemed. Our anxieties about this trip to Dallas now appeared to be unnecessary. The folks of Dallas were visibly overjoyed to see the 35th president of the United States, and their reception drained away all our earlier misgivings.

The motorcade snaked around a grassy knoll, through an underpass and flowed easily onto Dealey Plaza past a dingy little building housing schoolbooks. The motorcade was supposed to continue on to the Trade Mart, a huge hall where President Kennedy was to address some 2,000 Dallas citizens.

Suddenly, abruptly the car in front of us leaped forward, racing through what became a jostling, contorted crowd. What had earlier been a disciplined motorcade was now a chaotic Indianapolis speedway.

We turned to look at each other. No one dared to ask the dark question for fear of the answer it would bring. So we decided, having lost contact with the main motorcade, to drive on to the Trade Mart and join the presidential party there.

But the Trade Mart, filled to the rafters by a waiting audience, produced no president. I glanced at Mrs. Lincoln. Distracted, distraught, she was on the edge of unraveling. We wandered outside to find a backstage entrance and almost collided with a man racing toward the street, holding a hand radio. "What's going on?" I asked as he slowed to hear me. He shouted: "The president's been shot, the governor has been shot; they're at Parkland Hospital."

There is no fitting description for the



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reaction of our group. The debris of panic and dread fell upon us, an affliction of fear neither understandable nor believable.

I ran to the curb, where I saw a deputy sheriff standing by his car, an unwashed Dodge. Would he take us to Parkland Hospital, now, this instant? Yes, he would. We piled in, and he caromed off the curb, siren keening.

Within minutes we were at the hospital, where an unorganized throng, half civilians and half surly visaged police and Secret Service men wound around the entrance. The White House passes of my companions gained us entry. I found a place for Mrs. Lincoln in the office of the hospital administrator and raced down the stairs to the basement. In an austere gray-walled corridor I stood outside a stainless steel door. On the other side, I was told, was the emergency operating room, where the president was being examined by a horde of doctors. I did not know, nor did anyone else, that the body of the president had already been drained of life.

Down the corridor, in a small room, I located Mrs. Johnson, who was comforting Nellie Connally. "How is the governor?" I asked. Nellie wept, her shoulders shaking. In a muffled voice she whispered, "We don't know, we don't know." Mrs. Johnson, her arms around Nellie Connally, looked at me, her eyes misting.

The corridor was filled with congressmen—Jack Brooks of Beaumont, Henry Gonzalez of San Antonio, Albert Thomas of Houston, Homer Thornberry of Austin and others, all mute, apprehensive, none equipped to challenge the horror that overcame sanity.

After what seemed to be an eternity, I mounted the stairs to seek out Mrs. Lincoln. I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned. It was Cliff Carter, chief political agent of Vice President Johnson. His face was somber. He

said, "The vice president wants to see you now, Jack." He hesitated. In a low voice he said, "The president is dead, you know." I looked at him for a bare instant, and then I began sobbing. He grabbed my shoulders. "Get hold of yourself. We have to go to the vice president."

We moved swiftly through the corridor to a smallish room that was now empty. In the doorway stood Lem Johns, later to become chief of the White House Secret Service detail. "Jack," he said, "the vice president wants you on board Air Force One right now. I'll take you there."

A few minutes later we were in a police car charging through the streets on our way to Love Field. When we arrived, Air Force One had been moved to a remote corner of the airfield. It was now guarded by heavily

armed, menacing-looking security officers, weapons at the ready. Even with Lem Johns' Secret Service credentials, we were examined with long stares and searches.

I ran up the steps of the aircraft, bounded down the aisle toward midship, where I was suddenly inside the compartment of the presidential office. A sofa ran the rim of the compartment. Two tables were open, one with a chair on either side. (These, I learned, were for the president and his wife.) Across the aisle the other table accommodated four seats, two on either side. By the president's chair was a phone. The compartment was jammed with congressmen, the Dallas police chief and others whose faces were strange to me.

The vice president appeared in the narrow aisle that connected the presidential office to the presidential bedroom, a small room with twin beds, a toilet, a closet and not much else. Lyndon Johnson loomed in that slender aisle, a huge man, 6-foot-4, eyes taking in the compartment. He came forward and sat down slowly in the chair. I remember standing next to Rep. Albert Thomas and hearing him say, "Mr. President, we are here to carry out any orders you have for us." It was a ghostly intervention, the first time I had heard him called "Mr. President." Johnson raised his hand in recognition of Thomas' statement, and then he beckoned to me. I came to his side and bent down to receive whatever he had to say to me. His voice was so low I could barely hear him.

"I want you on my staff," he said. "Call Mary Margaret and tell her you are flying back with me to Washington." So green was I to Washington environs that I had little realization of what "staff" meant, nor did I at that instant fully fathom the import of LBJ's command.

I knew nothing of the stirrings that convulsed others on the plane. Gen. Godfrey McHugh, President Kennedy's Air Force aide, now seemingly in command of the presidential plane, had ordered it into the air. He did not know that LBJ had already communicated to the pilot that Air Force One

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was not to depart until President Kennedy's body had been brought aboard. McHugh was livid when he learned of the countermanding of his order.

Then occurred one of those tiny moments that illuminated how LBJ had reined in all his galvanic, restless passions and exhibited to those present and to the world the calm figure of the new commander, in charge, free from the corrosion of fear. I was seated next to him when he asked for water. The steward brought him the glass, and he reached out to grasp it. His hand was no more than a few inches from my eyes. I could see, up close, the large splayed, brown speckled wrist, the protrusion of bluish veins, the thick, sturdy fingers. As he reached for the glass, I saw no no trembling. The hand was unflinchingly steady. Here the rest of us were, drenched in barely contained hysteria, while the new president apparently was glacially resolute, unattended by any anxieties.

LBJ asked me, along with Bill Moyers and

Liz Carpenter, to draft a concise statement for him to deliver when we arrived at Andrews Air Force Base in Washington. Never have so many collaborated on so brief a statement, a mere 57 words. I recall the finished piece concluded with the words: "I ask God's help." He crossed out that line and wrote "I ask for your help—and God's."

LBJ made a decision that proved to be wise. He made a phone call to Robert Kennedy, the attorney general, and told Kennedy he was determined to be sworn in on the plane before taking off. Kennedy reminded him he didn't have to be sworn in there. He was president by virtue of the Constitution, and the swearing-in was not immediately required. Johnson murmured that he understood, but he would be sworn in as soon as U.S. District Judge Sarah Hughes had arrived and the body of the late president was safely on board.

My first assignment as a presidential assistant was to locate the oath of office. We searched for President Kennedy's Bible, which was reported to be aboard, but it was nowhere to be found. Later we were told it was not a Bible but a Catholic missal. Finally I called Washington and talked to a man named Nick Katzenbach, who I later learned was the deputy attorney general. After some frantic deploying of the full force of the U.S. government, Katzenbach discovered the oath of office, in Article Two, Section One of the Constitution itself. After it had been dictated to Marie Fehmer, LBJ's chief secretary, I got back on the phone with Katzenbach and checked very carefully the wording of the spare prose of the oath.

Judge Hughes finally arrived. Lyndon John-

son made a second important decision in the frenzy of those unruly hours. He realized that he had to prove beyond even modest doubt that while the light in the White House may flicker, the light in the White House can never go out. So Johnson quietly asked Mrs. Kennedy whether she would stand with him and Mrs. Johnson while Judge Hughes administered the oath.

Mrs. Kennedy, her eyes opaque and unseeing, nodded, and she stood beside LBJ, head slightly bowed, her pink jacket still splattered and stained with the blood of her husband, her hands quite still though I watched her slight frame shudder once, twice. Four days later, when Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress, he spoke words which that now famous photo of his swearing-in symbolized so dramatically, "John Kennedy said let us begin; I say let us continue."

When Judge Hughes concluded the ceremony, the new president shook her hand and kissed her on the cheek. Mrs. Kennedy murmured something to the president, and with uncertain step retired to the rear of the plane to sit near the flag-draped coffin of her husband. LBJ turned to Gen. McHugh and said: "Let's get airborne."

As we flew a straight line from Dallas to Washington, later reports claimed there was visible, serrated discontent flashing between the Kennedy and the Johnson people. If it was there, I could not see it. All I saw were men of great ability, Larry O'Brien, Kenny O'Donnell, Mac Kilduff, whose leader, friend and chief had been slain in the street, and now they were unmoored, adrift. What others saw as anger I recognized as terrible grief falling about them as an avalanche devours the countryside.

As we neared Andrews, Johnson became quieter, speaking easily but slowly. He seemed almost detached. When we landed, I stood beside the new president as we waited in the narrow corridor for the signal to deplane. There was a flurry coming from the front of the aircraft. Suddenly Bobby Kennedy appeared almost at a trot, moving swiftly by us to the rear of the plane, where a forklift was gently removing the coffin of President Kennedy. He didn't see LBJ, brushing past him so quickly, though they almost touched.

Spotlights gave the area a splotchy cast. A huge throng of newsmen, cameramen, Secret Service and officials of the government was waiting. The president stepped forward, gave his statement, answered none of the questions hurled at him, and within seconds we were aboard a chopper.

Exactly seven minutes later the chopper clattered to a landing on the South Lawn of the White House. It was 6:38 p.m. A new president had arrived to take command.

The writer, who served as a special assistant to Lyndon Johnson, is president of the Motion Picture Association of America.